

GENESIS 1 AND THE BIG BANG



It's often said that the opening account of God creating the world in Genesis 1 has been discredited by modern science and therefore the Bible cannot be taken seriously. Before this can be tested it's important to understand how Genesis 1 was written and what points it's making. If the aim of modern science is to identify the physical and chemical processes in the formation of the universe, what's the purpose and point of Genesis 1?

As with all literature Genesis was written into a specific context. It addresses and challenges specific theological ideas which were popular at the time it was written:

- The world was created by one God, not the result of conflict between many gods
- God made the sun, stars and moon to give us light; not to determine our destiny
- God made the sea, seen then as evil and dangerous, and all the creatures in it
- Human beings were the pinnacle of his creation, not an afterthought
- Human beings are made in God's image, to reflect God's character, and appointed as stewards of creation, not creatures to serve the whim of the gods
- God gave us food rather than us having to make offerings of food to God
- The world is a good creation of God, not something to be escaped from

More generally, Genesis 1 sets out the relationship between God, mankind and the rest of the creation. The Bible opens with the following verse "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Taking the first four words we see that God transcends the creation, and so everything finds its meaning, context and purpose in its creator.

The chapter makes fundamental points about God. God is one (as opposed to polytheism) and not the sum total of creation (as opposed to pantheism). God created a good world (as opposed to some dualisms where the "physical" is bad and the "spiritual" is good). In that world he appointed us as the stewards of his good creation.

The "seven days" have been arranged in a deliberate and carefully constructed poetic sequence to make theological points. Verse 2 introduces the seven days: "Now the earth was formless and empty..."

| formless... | ... and empty |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Day 1: Light / Darkness separated | Day 4: Sun, moon & stars created |
| Day 2: Water / Sky separated | Day 5: Sea creatures and birds created |
| Day 3: Sea / Land separated | Day 6: Animals and humanity created |
| Day 3a: Vegetation created | Day 6a: Vegetation given as food |
| Day 7: Sabbath Rest | |



So God brings form and order to the world and then fills it with life. Then we read of God's commission to Adam and Eve: Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

God has brought order to the world and filled it with life and now Adam and Eve are called to be fruitful, to fill the earth and to rule over it. In other words, to fill the world with life and bring order to it. God is inviting Adam and Eve to share in what he's doing with his creation. Thus Genesis 1 sets out mankind's role within God's creation.

There's a lot more going on in Genesis 1 than this brief outline can cover but we've seen enough to draw some initial conclusions.

- It's written to address a number of theological assumptions of its day
- It establishes the relationship between God, man and the creation
- It uses a carefully constructed poetic sequence to make its points
- It establishes the role of humanity in light of what God is doing with the creation
- It clarifies the accountability of humanity to our creator

From this very brief introduction it should be apparent that Genesis is dealing with a totally different set of questions to the physicists. If we press Genesis 1 into the mould of modern science it will look very silly because that was never the purpose for which it was written. It's a carefully constructed poem which offers us profound insight about God and our life and the world in relation to him. It's definitely not an attempt to describe the physical and chemical processes of the early universe.

When we read Genesis and theories about the early universes sympathetically, bearing in mind the aims and intentions of the authors, we find little conflict between them as they offer very different types of insight on different subjects. If we ask Genesis to answer questions about the physics of the early universe or we ask the Big Bang theory to answer questions about meaning and purpose in life we find that they answer different questions.

